

Mantra Meditation – The Why, the How, and the Methods



A mantra is one of the most common objects used for meditation – and one of the most powerful ones too. The practice of mantra meditation is found in many of the world’s contemplative traditions, and also in the practice of meditation in a secular context.

In this article, I’ll explore the different meditation techniques that employ mantra, how to choose a mantra, why mantras are powerful, and what are the different levels and subtleties of this practice. Personally, together with [trataka](#), mantra meditation is my favourite practice, so I’m delighted to write about it.

First, we start with the definition of mantra. *Mantra* is a Sanskrit word derived from two roots: *man* (meaning “mind” or “to think”) and *tra* meaning to “protect”, to “free from”, or “instrument/tool”. Therefore, mantras are tools of the mind, or tools to free the mind.

Some mantras have a literal meaning and can be translated, but most of them, according to tradition, derive their value mostly from their sound quality. Some are short, one-syllable mantras; others are long, composed of many words.

Sometimes the mantra is recited; at other times it is *listened to*. Sometimes it is repeated fast; at other times slow. Sometimes it is simply repeated by itself, and at other times in connection to concentration on the breathing, certain feelings, chakras, visualizations or abstract concepts.

Indeed, the subject of mantra and related practices is a vast and complex study within Hinduism, Yoga, and Buddhism. Here I've strived to give you a very broad overview of mantra meditation, with the **pragmatic and non-sectarian approach** that is characteristic of this blog. Whether you are agnostic or spiritually minded, this article will give you important practical tips for your practice.

At the bottom of this article you will find a button to download a **free PDF** copy of this article.

WHY USE A MANTRA?

The Transformative Power of Sound

You may be asking yourself, "What's so special about repeating a word, anyway? Why is it considered a powerful tool for meditation?"

Sound is vibration. And all the cells in your body are vibrating. Everything in the universe is vibrating, and each has its own rhythm. Your thoughts and feelings are, indeed, vibrations in your body and your consciousness.

[\[Video\]](#)

Sound patterns also affect the [water](#) in your body, your hormones secretion, cognition, behavior, and [psychological well-being](#).

Looked at in this way, your mind – your psyche – is a collection of patterns, each vibrating at its own peculiar frequency, speed, and volume. What the mystics and yogis of yore discovered is that by sustaining a particular sound vibration for a long time, the nature of the mind and body can be somewhat transformed.

Any musician or filmmaker will tell you of **the power that sound has to induce/evoke moods, thoughts, and emotions**. If listening to a song can change your mood and even [help heal your body](#), imagine the power of programming a specific sound into your mind, by repeating it thousands of times with care and attention!

Sound, rhythm and speech have profound effects on your body, thoughts, and emotions. Mantra meditation is the use of these three elements with the purpose of purifying, pacifying and transforming your mind and heart.

Thus the mantra, being an *instrument of the mind*, can help you create profound changes in your body and psyche, and produce altered states of consciousness. Mantra meditation is a method of *rotation of consciousness* around a sound, amplifying it for maximum effect. In the Yoga contemplative tradition, mantra meditation is often said to be the easiest and safest method.

And apparently, mantra can also calm down [those experiencing a life crisis](#)...

Mantra Replaces Thinking

At any given moment, our attention can be dwelling on only one object. Even when we say we are multitasking, what we are actually doing is switching objects of attention very quickly – which is why multitasking is [taxing and ineffective](#).

For meditation, the implication is pretty simple: in every moment that you are paying full attention to the mantra, you are not disturbed by any other thoughts, memories, or sensations. If you are able to continuously string together the ending of one mantra repetition to the beginning of the next, you'll remain in that beautiful state for the duration of your meditation.

A mantra replaces 10,000 different thoughts by one thought – a thought that gives peace and awareness. It allows you to collect your scattered attention, which is spread thin all over the place, and unify it, thus empowering it.

Of course, the [meditation process](#) is the same with other objects of concentration, such as breathing or a visualization. The advantage with a mantra, however, is that it easily overrides mental speech, which is the predominant form of conscious thinking for most people. Another advantage is that the rhythmic nature of mantra helps override those pesky songs that sometimes play continuously in our mind during meditation.

MANTRA MEDITATION ESSENTIALS

How to Choose Your Mantras for Meditation

Deciding which mantra to use depends first on your approach towards meditation – whether secular or spiritual. That approach will also affect the results you will get from the practice.

Some mantras, however, are quite universal and can be used with both approaches. Examples are the Sanskrit mantras *om* and *so ham*.

Secular approach

In this approach, meditation is seen as a tool, an exercise designed to bring you better health, performance, relaxation or personal growth. You don't necessarily believe in anything spiritual – be it God, enlightenment, soul, or life after death. Or maybe you do believe, but want to keep your meditation practice separate from that.

In this case, you can choose a mantra from your own language. It can be a word or a short sentence that carries a message you want to imbue into your psyche.

Here are some guidelines I suggest for picking a word:

- The **meaning** is the most important. Choose a word/sentence that represents something you want to develop more in yourself, feel more, or connect to. It could be *love, peace, freedom, awareness, light, courage*, etc.
- The **sound** of the word needs to speak to you. The only way to realize this is by repeating it for a few minutes, and observe how you feel before and after.
- Avoid words that have dubious meanings or possible negative connotations.

You can try a few mantras before you decide on which one most speaks to you. Once chosen, it is better to always use the same mantra, so its effects really build up.

Spiritual approach

If you meditate with a spiritual goal or purpose in mind, the way to choose a mantra is different. You may consider that each word contains its own “energy”, that became impregnated into it through the way it has been repetitively used by other people.

Hence it makes sense to pick up a traditional mantra – a word or sound that has been used by spiritual seekers for centuries, with noble attitude and intention.

In this case, it makes little sense to translate a mantra. You are better off using the original word in the language in which it was conceived/discovered (usually Sanskrit, Pali, Hebrew, Aramaic or Tibetan). Also, the correct pronunciation and intonation of the mantra is very important, since we are aiming at replicating that specific sound vibration.

The first step is then deciding which spiritual tradition and lineage most speaks to you (if you are unsure, [this article](#) can be a good start). Once you know what you resonate with best, then you may either:

- Find a teacher/master of that tradition – someone you respect – and ask him or her to suggest a mantra for you. Depending on the tradition, a mantra master will have practiced extensively different mantras, know the type of vibration of each one, and will be able to select one for you based on your specific goals and temperaments.
- Research the mantras used in that particular path, try each one for a few days, and then select the one that most gives you what you are looking for.

When repeating a mantra as a spiritual practice, try to simultaneously contemplate the *meaning or state* represented by that mantra. In a way, that's what makes mantra meditation more than a glorified affirmation practice.

The mantra is like a password, a key, to a certain state of consciousness or universal principle you want to experience.

In this approach, you are advised to keep the mantra secret. Even if it is a mantra that is here on the internet, and thousands practice it. The simple reason is: sacred is secret. Treat your mantra as sacred, as secret, and then its effects on your consciousness will go deeper.

Progress and Levels

The more we repeat our mantra, the more it is “energized” or “magnetized”. For one-syllable mantras, it is said that after 125,000 repetitions it “gets a life of its own”. It is our repeated attention working with the mantra that charges it. The mantra eventually

becomes the most powerful thought in your mind, and then you can truly rely on it to bring you peace.

Once your mantra really gets momentum, the repetition becomes more and more effortless. It's almost as if we simply "start" or "log into" the mantra, and it continues on its own, taking us into inner silence.

This is the traditional progress of the practice:

- **Verbal recitation** — you repeat it out loud. This engages more of your senses, making it easier to keep your attention focused.
- **Whispering** — the lips and tongue move, but there is barely any sound coming. This practice is subtler and deeper than the verbal recitation.
- **Mental recitation** — you repeat the mantra only inside your mind. In the beginning, there is naturally some movement in the tongue and throat; but with time these also cease, and the practice is purely mental. This stage is what people typically associate with *mantra meditation*.
- **Spontaneous listening** — at this point you are no longer repeating the mantra, but the mantra goes on by itself in your mind, spontaneously, all the time. At this point, there is no need to worry about its loudness, speed, etc. Just listen to it being repeated as it naturally wants to be repeated. This level is called *ajapa japa*.

As you can see, there is a progression from gross to subtle, from effort to effortless. A potential mistake some people make is wanting to skip levels and start directly with mental repetition only, or spontaneous repetition. That is a much more steep climb than the step-by-step progression outlined above.

Even if you don't like verbal recitation, and want to go directly to the mental level, I recommend you at least do a few rounds of whispering recitation in the beginning. That will help you center your mind on the mantra much more easily.

At whatever point you find yourself on this scale, if you realize that your mind gets disengaged from the mantra, distracted into thinking or sleeping, then take it down a notch and put some more conscious effort into using the mantra, until it is ready to carry you once again.

MANTRA MEDITATION TECHNIQUES

Mantra can be combined with other practices, such as visualization, focusing on a chakra, devotion, etc. The first technique explained here can be practiced with a purely secular/agnostic approach; the other ones have some spiritual elements in them.

Mantra Meditation

The guidelines below form the bare-bones of meditating with a mantra, and are also **applicable for all other practices**.

Posture

For formal mantra meditation, adopt a [seated posture](#).

For informal practice, you can be repeating the mantra in the back of your mind, with open eyes, during other daily activities.

Speed

Chanting the mantra quickly energizes you. Chanting it slowly calms down the mind. If you make it too fast or too slow, it will become an automatic process and your mind will either wander into thinking or fall sleep.

The speed with which you recite the mantra will vary also depending on the length of the mantra. Short mantras (one to three syllables long) are often repeated more slowly than phrase-long mantras.

Since this is technique-specific and mantra-specific, it is best to follow the suggestions given by your teacher. In the absence of one, experiment with different speeds of repetition and see which one you like the most.

[Repeating your mantra fast produces gamma waves in the brain. Repeating it slowly produces theta waves.](#)

[CLICK TO TWEET](#)

In my experience, both repeating the mantra quickly and repeating it slowly takes me to a state of silence, although the “taste” of that silence is different in each case. When repeating slowly, it feels like a type of deepening, zooming in, *theta-waves* type of

silence. When repeating it fast, it is more of an intense, “in the flow”, *gamma-waves* type of silence.

In any case, it is best to keep a uniform speed of repetition, rather than change it multiple times during a session.

Loudness and Force

If your mind is very noisy, you might want to “turn up the volume” of the mantra repetition, making out louder and thicker. Otherwise, your attention will just fly off on a tangent with thinking.

As your mind gets quieter, the mantra often gets “thinner and lower”, like a high-frequency sound that you can barely hear. The word itself is almost lost and the mantra feels more like sound vibrations.

If that happens naturally for you, let it be so. But if you again lose hold of the mantra and forget it, it’s better to bring it back to a level where you can stay with it more easily.

Breathing

You may or may not synchronize the mantra with your breathing. Some options are:

- **Both inhalation and exhalation.** If your mantra is very short, like *om*, you can repeat it once when inhaling, and again when exhaling. Or you can increase the speed and repeat it three times on inhalation and three times on exhalation – or as many times as it feels good for your speed and length of breathing. If your mantra is long, then you can do it half on inhalation, and the second half on exhalation.
- **Only exhalation.** Inhale without any sound, and repeat the mantra when exhaling.
- **Regardless of breathing.** Just focus on the mantra, paying no attention to the breathing. With time, the breathing tends to naturally synchronize with the rhythm of the mantra.

Mind

Whether you are reciting the mantra or just listening to it, the mind's task is to actively pay attention to each repetition. Let every repetition be fresh, new, full of life and awareness.

Unite your mind with the mantra completely. Become one with it. Let every ounce of your attention be engaged with it. One way to facilitate that is by putting some feeling into the practice – such as care, curiosity, reverence, gratitude, or whatever makes sense for that particular mantra.

Think of the mantra as a radio station, and your mind as the antenna. The problem with this antenna, though, is that it keeps switching frequency by itself. Our goal is to keep this antenna in sync with the mantra.

After some time you'll notice that while there might be a layer of thinking going on, there is also a layer of mantra on a deeper level of your mind. Move your awareness to that deeper layer. Dwell there.

Finally, do not force your mind. That creates tension, which is not conducive to meditation. The task is simply to maintain awareness of the mantra, moment after moment, without being heavy-handed. It's a continuous and relaxed awareness.

Mantra in Yoga – Chakra, Pranayama, Kundalini

In the contemplative tradition of Yoga, there are many paths that use mantra meditation. In these practices, mantra repetition is usually connected with the breathing, specific visualizations, contemplations, and the *chakras*.

Chakras

In some lineages (*Kundalini Yoga*, *Laya Yoga* and *Tantra Yoga*) there is the practice of reciting mantras while focusing the mind on specific chakras (centers in the body). One way to practice this is by repeating the seed-sound of each *chakra*. Here are the main *chakras* with their mantras, and the pronunciation guide in parenthesis.



- Root Chakra —> LAM (“lum”)
- Sacral Chakra —> VAM (“vum”)
- Solar Plexus Chakra —> RAM (“rum”)
- Heart Chakra —> YAM (“yum”)
- Throat Chakra —> HAM (“hum”)
- Third Eye Chakra —> OM
- Crown Chakra —> *Silence*

The technical name for this meditation is *chakra mantra dharana*.

Another way is to simply use your favorite mantra, and while repeating it, focus your attention on the Third Eye or Heart chakra, as if the mantra is originating there. This allows you to add a spatial dimension to the meditation, thus engaging more of your senses.

Pranayama Breathing



In Hatha Yoga, Tantra, and other yogic schools, there is also the practice of synchronizing the mantra with specific breathing patterns. Here are some examples:

- **HAM mantra (“I am”).** Repeating “A” upon inhalation and “HAM” upon exhalation.
- **SO-HAM mantra.** Repeating “SO” upon inhalation and “HAM” upon exhalation, while moving your attention and breathing up and down your spine.
- **SOHAM – HAMSA.** Inhale through your left nostril while repeating “so”, then exhale through your right nostril while repeating “ham”. On the way back, now inhale through your right nostril repeating “ham”, and exhale through your left nostril repeating “sa”. That is one cycle. Practice at least ten cycles.

There are also other more elaborate practices, but if you are like me and prefer simplicity, these will do.

Rituals & Visualization

In the school of Mantra Yoga, an elaborate use of mantras with visualizations and rituals is employed. This theme is beyond the scope of this article.

Contemplation

In Vedanta (*Jnana Yoga*), mantras that encapsulate a spiritual truth are used. These are called “Mahavakyas”, or great sayings. The main ones are:

- *Aham Brahmasmi* (“I am Brahman”)
- *Tat Vam Asi* (“Thou art That”)
- *Sarvam khalvidam brahman* (“All is Brahman”)

In this practice, the main focus is the contemplation of the meaning of the mantra, rather than the mere repetition of words or sounds. The goal is to develop wisdom by reinforcing an understanding or insight.

Mantra Writing (likhita japa)

This practice engages more senses: writing the mantra, seeing the mantra, speaking the mantra, hearing the mantra. Here are some basic guidelines:

- Set aside a good quality notebook and pencil/pen to be used only for the purposes of this practice.

- During the whole session, write down the mantra on paper, while also repeating it in your mind, out loud, or whispering it.
- To intensify the exercise, try to write as small and as neatly as possible. This will require more concentration.
- Fix your eyes on the notebook. Don't move them away until you have completed the session.

Deity Meditation – Tantra & Devotional Paths

In both these paths, mantra meditation is sometimes done with open eyes, while keeping count of the number of repetitions by using a necklace of 108 beads (also called a *mala*).

Mantra in Tantra



The real Tantra, as developed in India and Tibetan Buddhism, is very different from the tantra commercialized in the West, which has the purpose of sexual enhancement.

In the path of traditional Tantra, a core spiritual practice is *Deity Yoga*. The goal of this practice is to experience a state of communion/identity with certain universal forces of nature, personified as gods and goddesses, and thus awakening spiritual insights and

qualities in the consciousness of the practitioner. (Jungian psychologists would regard these deities as archetypes of the collective unconscious.)

For this purpose, mantra is the essential vehicle. In Tantra, mantra is not a prayer. It's not even the name of the deity, but the *sound-form* of that deity. Once we connect with the power of the mantra, then the vibration of our own mind becomes linked with that larger mind, which itself has a vibratory nature.

In Tantra (Hindu or Buddhist), while repeating the mantra the practitioner will typically also employ one or more of the following practices:

- **Visualize** the form of the chosen deity;
- **Contemplate** the attributes of that deity (like power, beauty, wisdom, etc.);
- **Gaze** at an image or symbol (*yantra*) of that deity, just as in [trataka](#);
- **Cultivate feelings** of reverence, awe, devotion or surrender to the deity;
- **Develop the attitude** of identifying oneself with the deity approached through the mantra.

Examples of mantras in Hindu tantra are the famous *shakti bijas*: Aim, Hrim, Shrim, Halim, Krim, Klim, Strim, Hum, Sauh, etc.

Mantra Japa in Bhakti Yoga

In the "Yoga of Devotion" (*bhakti*), the mantra used is the name of the Divine in the form and aspect you prefer. The practitioner then repeats that name, or a short prayer containing that name, again and again, with feelings of devotion.

The mantras will depend on the deity selected. Here are some examples of mantras for popular deities in the Hindu pantheon:

- Shiva —> *Om Namah Shivaya*
- Vishnu —> *Om Namo Bhagavate Vasudevaya*
- Ganesh —> *Om Gam Ganapataye Namaha*
- Saraswati —> *Om Aim Mahasarasvatyai Namah*

Other Traditions

Buddhist Mantra Meditation



In Buddhism, although the breath is more universally used, there is the recognition of the power of mantra as a tool for focusing the mind.

In Theravada Buddhism, chanting certain mantras is used as an aid for concentration, especially by lay people. The Venerable Ajahn Sumedho, for example, recommends the mantra *Buddho*, with the suggested practice of reciting “Bud” as we inhale and “-dho” as we exhale, so that the mind is occupied with the mantra for the full cycle of the breath.

In Mahayana Buddhism, mantras are chanted related to different forms of the Buddha. The practice of chanting – although that is not quite the same as mantra meditation – is also found in most Buddhist traditions, including Zen.

For Nichiren Buddhists, recitation of the mantra *Nam Myōhō Renge Kyō* is their main spiritual practice.

Tibetan Buddhism uses mantras extensively, as we discussed above in the topic of Tantra.

Here is a list of Buddhist mantras for meditation:

- Pali Mantras
 - *Sabbe satta sukhi hontu*
 - *Om shanti shanti shanti*
 - *Buddho*
 - *Buddham saranam gacchami. Dhammam saranam gacchami. Sangham saranam gacchami.*
- Sanskrit Mantras
 - *Gate gate paragate parasamgate bodhi svaha*

- *Om Mani Padme Hum*
- *Om Tare Tuttare True Svaha*
- Chinese
 - *Namo Amitufofo*

Christian Mantra Meditation

The practice of Contemplative Prayer, also known as [Christian Meditation](#), has the same mechanics of mantra meditation. A sacred word from Christian tradition is chosen – such as Lord, Father, Jesus, Mary, Abba, Mercy, Love, or *maranatha* (Aramaic for “Come, Lord!”) – and then repeated with feelings of devotion.

It is worth noting that this style of Christian Meditation was created by the Irish Benedictine monk John Main, who learned mantra meditation from a Hindu swami when he was serving in Malaysia.

Sufi Mantra Meditation



In Sufism, the name for mantra is *Zikr* (or *Dhikr*). The essential aspect of this practice is the continual remembrance of God, typically by repeating *Allah*(God), *Allah Ho* (God is) or *La Illalahu* (“God is God”).

We also find a Sufi saying that alludes to the highest stage of mantra practice (spontaneous repetition): “First you do the *zikr* and then the *zikr* does you.”

Transcendental Meditation

TM is perhaps the most famous form of mantra meditation outside of India. Despite all their marketing efforts in differentiating the two, the TM technique is basically a mantra meditation.

I'll spare you of the official narrative, as you can read that on [their site](#). Here I'll just point out some facts that are not widely discussed:

- As mentioned, their technique is essentially mantra meditation, which can be learned for free or through a good book.
- The mantras they teach are [not unique](#) for each student but given based on their gender and age group.
- Their mantras are not “meaningless sounds”, but actually Tantric names of Vedic deities.
- The TM organization present itself as secular, but they have deep spiritual roots. Hence the initiation ceremony and the lineage of gurus. And, if it is spiritual by nature, why are they charging for initiation?
- Often they teach that the TM technique doesn't involve effort. However, as discussed above, dropping all effort and just listening to the mantra is something we can only do *effectively* after a long period of training where we have purposefully repeated the mantra, with awareness and focus. If you skip that and just go directly to spontaneous repetition, you will soon reach a plateau in your practice, and deep levels of concentration leading to *samadhi* will not be developed.

I explore these items in greater detail [here](#). And [here](#) is me explaining their “secret technique” in Quora (I got 120 thousand views for “revealing” this, as well as a lot of hate email/comments).

On the positive side, the TM organization is indeed helping many people to start a solid meditation practice, and is marketing it widely. If you practice TM and feel it's good for you, don't let my writings demotivate you – by all means continue with the practice.

PARTING THOUGHTS

My intention with this article was two-fold:

- To give you an overview of the breadth and depth of mantra meditation in different traditions
- To share practical instructions about mantra meditation, its variations, and levels of practice

If you read this far, well done! I bet you now have a much better understanding of mantra and where to go from here.

If you don't yet have a mantra practice and are confused where to start, I'd recommend you select a mantra (either secular or spiritual), and start practicing it according to the basic instructions under the "Mantra Meditation" heading above.

Now it's time for me to wrap up this long essay and get back to my mantra

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